Representation and memorialization of the experiences of women in indenture

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Indian Women as Indentured Labour Migrants: A Brief Historiography

British colonial and Indian nationalist depictions of Indian women who migrated to work on plantations under the indenture system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began to be challenged in the mid 1980s by revisionist and feminist historians (Emmer 1985; Reddock 1985). Whilst they 'disagreed over the extent to which indentured women were forced to accede to the demands of predatory men, they collectively sought to exculpate women from the charges of immorality served up by contemporaries, and repeated in the traditional historiography' (Carter 2012, 5). Jo Beall's work on indentured Indian women on Natal sugar estates drew attention to how women's labour and their reproduction of labour power was used and abused on colonial plantations (1991, 90-91) and assessed case studies of violence against women to conclude: 'This is not evidence of their promiscuity. This is not proof that they derived benefit from their scarcity value. This does not indicate that Indian labourers were unable to sustain responsible and long-term relationships.' (109). In a recent critique of Beall's work Kalpana Hiralal argues that 'Her analysis implies that women under indenture were devoid of agency and that the colonial state, plantation and patriarchal structures were far too powerful for women to oppose' citing more recent research on Natal which has 'illuminated the humanizing aspects of migration and provided a platform for diverse gendered experiences (2014, 242).

By the turn of the new millennium, the historiography had moved towards more nuanced appraisals of women's experiences on the sugar plantations. In 2001 Sumita Chatterjee summed up the period of indentureship as 'shifting, protean and reflective of a high level of experimentation and adaptation' as migration seriously disrupted familiar sites of social and cultural interaction and the indentured Indians moved into a borderland – 'the narrow space between white plantation and black peasant societies, belonging to neither but relational to both' (2001, 218). The role of the state in regulating these spaces was underscored by Parbattie Ramsarran who pointed out that while holding depots 'became sites whereby new forms of social intercourses, social institutions and group identities among, and between, indentured labourers evolved' these were 'social spaces governed by a powerful and unrelenting colonial apparatus' (2008, 179) and Meenakshi Thapan who concludes that migration 'is clearly not a free-floating uncontrolled process … the state regulates the process from the start … it determines the varying degrees to which men and women are rendered vulnerable in an alien world (2005, 57). This is particularly significant when one reflects that many women travelling as part of the indenture system were not in fact, indentured, in the sense of signing a work contract. This rendered them 'freer' in some respects than the men but also particularly vulnerable because they did not have legally enshrined rights through a formal contract, to a wage, a home, rations or medical care. It was expected that they would find a male 'protector' on the sugar estate and perhaps gain additional economic sustenance from providing services such as cooking and laundry for single indentured men and from daily verbal hire terms where women's labour was required on the plantation. In my own work, I have sought to show how 'the complex hierarchies of gender and authority of the plantation and the under-utilization of women in the sugar economy problematized the sexual and family relationships of women under indenture' (Carter 2014, 278).

Resituating the experiences of indentured women within the broader framework of Indian labour history has been a further objective of recent research. Madhavi Kale had drawn attention to the need to critique representations of subaltern women migrants which 'contribute to making Indian indentured migration overseas seem anomalous in, separate from, and only marginally significant to Indian labour history' (1998, 143) and Margaret Mishra's retelling of Kunti's rape as a multi-layered story in which lies and sexuality were brought to bear in the service of securing nationalist support for the abolition of indenture is an eloquent response (2008, 44-45). Arunima Datta's work offers further insights into how violence against indentured women sparked debates amongst colonial administrators in India and overseas and 'unveiled tensions within the Empire' as she unpacks the multiple strategies through which 'coolie women operating within multiple hegemonies that often made 'immorality' inescapable … manipulated the colonial infrastructure and their position within it to survive or escape unfavourable situations (2016, 598). She stresses that colonial administrators and Indian nationalists were alike in seeking to downplay the 'active engagement of coolie women in incidents of wife enticement, adultery and partner desertion (585) and concludes,

> No matter how 'inconsequential' the daily strategies of coolie women might have seemed, it is important to acknowledge them, as larger and older fields of political and economic history remain incomplete without addressing such micro-histories. In the case of the coolie women, both their victimhood and the agency they used to resist it, reveal the disorder and tension within the Empire. The situation of coolie women also demonstrates the Empire's failure to prevent problems within one colony being discussed in other colonies, which eventually fed into the formation of organized long-distance nationalist resistance against their rule. Yet, since nationalists shared many of the assumptions of colonialists in regard to gender and class, the liberation they offered coolie women was limited and incomplete. Coolie women's liberation struggles during this period took place largely in the day-to-day realities of gaining a living, avoiding or escaping oppressive relationships and seeking to form and maintain more positive alliances. (598)

The Bodies of Subaltern Women Migrants

As Bahadur (2015) has argued, 'who "coolie women" were … is at its heart a story about the demand for women's bodies, for labor, for sexual gratification, and for procreation' and while the colonial archives is, for the most part, unable to document the 'interior lives' of the indentured, their physical bodies crowd the pages of official documents and contemporary colonial newspapers which catalogue criminal injuries 'in grim detail: the precise number of wounds, the inches they bit into a skull or cheekbone, the specific body parts lopped.' The ways in which the bodies of indentured women were presented and discussed serves both to highlight their oppression as migrants and as workers alongside their resistance to social stigmatization and control for which they too often paid the ultimate price.

Throughout the period of indenture women's bodies and appearance were scrutinized at each stage of the migration process. At the sites of recruitment and the ports of departure they were looked over by emigration agents and inspected by medical personnel. 'Bazaar females', a euphemism for prostitutes, were rejected where possible in preference for young women of 'good character.' Efforts to ascertain the 'healthiness' of women through intimate medical examinations were not infrequently resisted by women and objected to by their male family members and partners, necessitating compromise and negotiation on the part of colonial officials (Carter 2014, 272). In Mauritius where ambitious plans to expand the sugar plantation sector coincided with a drive to recruit labour from India, the Protector of Immigrants responded to complaints made about intrusive medical procedures by recommending that women should not be subjected to close examination and the indignity of being 'stripped of their clothes' (Carter 1994, 46-47).

On the voyage there were often further outrages to endure in what was a confined and alien space – for most migrants it was their first sea voyage. Zermuddee Ackram described what happened to her after she left her designated place to go and smoke a cheroot: ‘I had irons put on my wrists by the English Doctor - they were put on about 6 am, and were taken off by the Assistant Doctor about 6 in the evening.' When she refused to eat, after being freed from her chains, she received further physical punishment: 'The Assistant Doctor gave me three cuts with a cane, each of which brought blood.' This left her feeling so 'ashamed', she attempted to throw herself overboard and was only saved by the intervention of the ship's captain who caught hold of her. (Carter 1994, 52).

On board ship women were vulnerable to the unwanted attentions of the crew and many complaints were recorded against the medical staff. In one especially notorious case, which led to a trial and the dismissal of a ship’s doctor, damning evidence was heard from British crew members as well as from Indian migrants as to the doctor’s propensity to order women to go to his cabin on the pretext of examining them, where he subjected them to sexual assaults, and rapes. The abuse continued after the migrants had disembarked and been housed at the Canonniers Point quarantine station. There, Champah, a thirteen year old girl travelling with her parents, was ordered to go to the doctor’s quarters to take some ‘quinine’. On arriving there, she was instead given a glass of alcohol. She stated ‘he then put me on his bed and had intercourse with me. I began crying out; he then put his hands upon my mouth.’ (Carter 1996, 94).

At the immigration depot in Mauritius, where planters and their representatives attended to select workers for the sugar estates, arriving Indian women were not indentured along with the men, and it was anticipated that they would accompany the male migrants to the plantations. Single women were allotted to bands of male workers with whom they had

formed some attachment, or were expected to marry from the depot to Indian men already in the colony; as such, their bodies were subject to be claimed or rejected. Men in search of a female companion would look over the single arrivals and petition for them. Caste and regional status were important pre-requisites for some spouse-seekers; other petitions prioritise the labour that the hoped-for spouse would carry out: Gunga asked for a woman 'to look after my house and my animals'; Jookhoo wanted a woman to act as his personal nurse because he was 'continually ill'. There are few records of the responses to these petitions on the part of the Indian women; at least we know that they had some say in the selection process: on one occasion, Ramsoroop, who was looking for a 'Calcutta woman' was sent away empty handed because, in the terse wording of the Protector's minute 'only one in the depot and she would not have him' (Carter 1994, 65). There is little doubt, however, that a not inconsiderable number of women were trafficked, particularly in those colonies where, like Mauritius -anxious for a settled working population to emerge from indenture - the government was prepared to pay male immigrants a 'bounty' for bringing their 'wives' or indeed any female with them. It soon became apparent that male sirdars and returnees were taking advantage of these substantial monetary payments to bring several 'wives' who would be 'sold or transferred to other men' soon after their arrival. Buskeet, who worked as a cook on the ships conveying migrants back and forth from India, was discovered to have brought different women with him each time he worked the passage to Mauritius, whom he sold after his arrival, no doubt supplementing his earnings handsomely through his women-trafficking sideline (Carter 1998, 27).

On the plantation, which was a virtual state-within-a-state, women's bodies continued to be subjected to unwanted sexual attentions by overseers, medical examinations by estate doctors, confinement and other punishments or deprivations. Women not infrequently sought

to attempted to hide illness for fear of being sent to the estate hospital; those who brought skills and could serve as midwives and as traditional healers were consequently highly valued by their compatriots working on overseas sugar estates and played an important role in mitigating the problems associated with the removal from traditional village support structures. Women sought to conceal their bodies from the gaze of men in the plantation hierarchy but their lodgings in the 'coolie lines' were not safe spaces; women who were deemed troublesome or a health risk, or who caught the eye of an estate manager or an overseer, or who simply could not earn enough to support themselves had little security in a sugar economy which under-valued their labour and thereby 'problematized the sexual and family relationships of women under indenture' (Carter 2014, 278).

As a scarce commodity, women were frequently called upon to service the sexual and domestic labour needs of male indentured Indians. To illustrate these multiple oppressions of women under indenture and examine questions of choice and ownership of the female body during indenture, Mishra examines the brutal murder of Sukhrania by her male partner Lachminarain: 'Sukhrania's scalp was fragmented and her brain was dislodged. She had a cut across the back of her neck four inches into her spinal column, a cut across her left cheek, a wound across the back of her right ankle opening the ankle joint and a linear bruise across the back six inches long. The muscles at the back of the right leg were missing and there was a wound half an inch long and half an inch deep at the extremity.' Mishra concludes that by mutilating Sukhrania for making herself sexually available to other men, Lachminarain sought to teach her a lesson 'and to warn other women who chose to follow her path of their tragic end.' (Mishra 42-43).

Violence against women by indentured men and sirdars was too often tacitly upheld or supported by estate managers and owners. When Sanichery left her husband, the plantation

overseer encouraged her husband's efforts to drag her forcibly back to their hut. However, there are many examples of women's resistance to claims of ownership over their bodies; Sanichery fought back, grasping a glass bottle and cutting her husband's flesh with it (Carter 2014, 279). Subaltern Indian women overseas used the opportunities afforded by their migrations and the colonial state apparatus to contest the claims of their spouses and families over ownership of their bodies. Etranea successfully won the right to freedom from her own father, when he sought to force her to return under his roof, lodging a complaint against him at the police station, in which she claimed that he had 'on several occasions disposed of her for money to Indians, with whom she did not care to live'. (Carter 1994, 72). The self-perception of Indian women under indenture as entitled to determine their own movements and make their own choices of partner is significant. At a time when women were legally the chattels of their husbands, their efforts to prevent men from using laws regulating marriage to lay claims to them are notable. Consequently the archival record yields numerous examples of women refusing to enter legally binding relationships with men imposed upon them by estate managers who were themselves under pressure from clerics and colonial officials anxious to refute allegations made in India and Britain about rampant immorality among the indentured populations in the sugar colonies. (Carter 2014, 280). As Datta (2016) has observed, the scarcity value of Indian women in colonial export economies characterised by imbalanced sex ratios was such that the possession of a woman 'became a form of social capital for men' who were 'privileged' by having a wife, but also fearful of losing her. While this situation victimized women, it also cast them as 'actors' pushed into taking steps to reclaim control over their bodies, and significantly, 'the colonial strategy of demonizing Indian coolie households as inherently immoral and violent spaces backfired by opening the way for a nationalist critique of the colonial order that created such spaces. … The sexual

morality of coolie women therefore became a battleground for colonial and anti-colonialist discourses' (595-6).

Seeing Indentured Women: Representations, Reinterpretations & Memorializations

Alongside textual descriptions of Indian women in vulnerable or immoral guises purveyed by reformists and nationalists are visual renderings of 'coolie belles' derived from the sketches and photographs of colonial era travellers and documentalists. They do not, by and large, complement the written archive, rather, they complicate the telling and retelling of coolie women's history. In postcards and sketches women are portrayed as meek and mute, suggestively erotic, richly clothed and often bejewelled, figuratively distant from the violence and squalor of the estate camps. However, from the policing of plantation spaces, an alternative source of visual imagery has been created: the thousands of photographs of migrant women taken by employees of colonial Immigration Departments constitute valuable records of subaltern Indians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These head and shoulder portraits offer a succession of glimpses into the world of the colonial Indian woman migrant and taken as a collection they speak to the multi-dimensionality of the 'coolie experience.'

Eye-witness accounts of interactions with migrants very occasionally reveal a hint of this variegation. Captain W.H. Angel's voyage to Trinidad in charge of the clipper ship *Sheila* carrying indentured Indians is notable for the lengthy description of the following woman:

> Amongst our coolie passengers [she paid her own passage money down], was a fine looking woman about forty years of age. She had returned to India from Trinidad, having completed her term entitling her to a free passage. She got the name among us of the 'Queen of Sheba'. She had made quite a considerable fortune in the island, partly by judicious marriages, and partly in her widowhood, and as a trader, for as

> such she had a natural inclination; but in time a longing came over her to return to the land of her birth, but a short experience was enough for her. The priests got hold of her, and required her to do heavy penance, and pay a lot of money to get back her caste, which she had lost by leaving India; but she declined to buy the goods at the price asked, and came with us, her expression on the subject being, "India only fit place for coolie". She made a corner in fresh fish at St Helena by buying up all the fisherman's catch for the day, as a treat for the coolies on board. The lady was a sight to look at when she was fully dressed, according to her ideas. For one thing she was loaded with jewellery all over her person – immensely heavy silver bracelets from the elbows to the shoulder, also from the wrists to the elbows on both arms; similar from ankles to knees, a kind of diadem on the forehead; a lot of rings of all sorts on her toes and her fingers; a pendant nose ring; and the ear-lobes were pierced with holes big enough to admit bottle corks, which were the customary adornment at ordinary times, but in cases of ceremony, the holes were decorated in the same manner as the rest of her person. (Ramchand & Samaroo 1995, 90).

It can be inferred that Captain Angel's curiosity about his demonstrably wealthy and independent-minded passenger led him to make the enquiries into her circumstances which he then considered interesting enough to incorporate in his voyage narrative. In so doing he draws attention to a phenomenon well known to historians – that of returnees re-migrating to the sugar colonies – and provides a valuable case study of the kind rarely seen in colonial archives which tend to focus on policing, punishing and regulating subaltern migrants. In a scholarly assessment of this narrative it has rightly been observed that Angel fails to name his interesting passenger, provides an orientalist description of her ornamentation and leaves the modern reader with a sense of 'a lost opportunity for words that might have gone further' (Tumbridge 2012, 6-7). Nonetheless the story paints a pen portrait of a 'strong, shrewd, fearless woman' who not only provided a meal for 'her newly indentured jahaji-bahins/bahais (ship-sisters/brothers) but whom we can picture acting as an advisor to the first time voyagers, informing them what they could expect in Trinidad. She is a woman who is 'on the border between "inside" and outside the indentured system … she does not care to regain her caste or stay in India (she no longer fits into the patriarchal/caste system), her autonomy, agency, and affiliations to both the migrants and Trinidad are not in question.' (13-17)

Captain Angel's description of the 'Queen of Sheba' is accompanied by a photograph of an Indian woman covered in jewels, which may or may not be her portrait, but appears closely to resemble the 'coolie belle' genre of postcard-photographs in which the Indian woman becomes an 'exotic, adorned, domesticated and disciplined' object (Mahabir 2014). They are characterized by the invisible hand of the male photographer who appears to control the poses and stages the airbrushed sets (Bahadur 2015). Nevertheless the presence of the jewellery, in referencing the social and economic position of power which some women were able to achieve through their migrations, helps to subvert the genre. In like vein, the photographed women who fix our gaze in the colonial Immigration Department registers individually and collectively disrupt their categorization as a policed, homogenized, 'coolie' population.

The photographic section of the immigration registers held at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius, consisting of a quarter of a million portrait images, dating between 1864 and 1913 and bound in 65 albums, is a uniquely important record 'of the physiognomy, and style of dress and ornamentation of the ordinary Indian village folk who came to Mauritius, of interest to historical anthropologists and other scholars of the Indian diaspora and of the Indian subcontinent itself. The head and shoulder portraits reveal, for example, the varying types of headgear worn by the Indian immigrants, uniforms denoting occupational status, eg railway workers in livery, the jewellery worn by women, the general attire of both the male and females, and …. details of medical conditions and forms of tattooing in practice amongst Indians' (Carter & Flynn, 2017). Most of the photographs of Indian women were not taken on their first arrival in the colony, but often decades later, perhaps prior to a return trip to India, and in many documented cases, when obtaining proofs of single status prior to marriage in the colony.

The photographic archive provides ‘a compelling vision of multiple identities and diverse outcomes that made up the migrant experience’ and serve as a powerful reminder that so-called ‘coolies’ were not simply passive victims of indenture. (Carter & Flynn 2017). Many of the subjects face the viewer directly, and as Reza Tavakol remarks :

> if not at the photographer, who were these gazes aimed at? Were they coded signals to some future empathetic human beings that could some day capture these long travelling gazes, decipher their messages and at long last hear their painful tales of bygones? What does it take, what depth of solidarity, to truly capture the messages in these gazes? (Tavakol 2016, 3).

Le Comte’s study of immigrant photographs (2015) stresses that ‘these old portraits are full of information, expression and aesthetic value.’ His research on one of the photographers, Abraham Sinapa - himself of Southern Indian descent - reveals that Sinapa ‘captured the subjects of his photographs in poses that allow us to assume an intentional artistic effect. He then deliberately intervened, ‘sharpening and softening the features of the sitter, to create expressive and beautiful portraits’ (5). The value of this photographic archive lies not only, therefore, in its evidential recording of the appearance, dress and ornamentation of subaltern Indians, but in the fact that its subject is taken seriously, lifting the individual out of the anonymised condition of ‘coolie’ and hinting at the richness of the migration experience. What Krista Thompson (2011) notes about how scholars have made use of photographs in slavery studies is also applicable to studies of indenture: ‘to render slavery more legible, the unrepresentable more imaginable, the unrecorded more truthful, the past more present …. to substantiate their narrative accounting of slavery….. to give slavery material form …. consolidating memory and history in the process (55-6).

In the reinterpretation of the indenture experience, an increasingly fruitful symbiotic relationship has developed between creative and academic authors. Khal Torabully's Coolitude poetry (1999) has inspired historians and novelists alike to interrogate and reframe their understandings of the journey of indenture, and has found an echo in music and art. The influential author of the *Sea of Poppies* (Ghosh 2008) explicitly acknowledges a debt to a wide range of historical studies (469-70) while his novel has been hailed for reclaiming 'the Indian Ocean as a site full of history of cultural exchanges, conflict, and contestation, testifying to the tangled global relationships across multiple continents ... as a vital site of conflict of heterogeneous historical encounters' (Arora 2012). Shanthini Pillai's analysis of another of Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Glass Palace*, stresses its importance in helping to reconfigure the 'coolie' - questioning the traditional depictions of docility and malleability and offering the Indian subaltern 'a pathway into resignifying his place in the social hierarchy' (Pillai 2012, 57) In reconstructing the lives of women migrants, Mariam Pirbhai (2010) has remarked how Indo-Caribbean women novelists have been working 'in tandem with historians in the memorialization and excavation of women's narratives, for they not only strive to fill in historical gaps but also to mobilize these stories as models of cultural and feminist agency for present generations' (47). These relationships are also building transoceanic dialogues, helping, for example, to explore 'links between the Caribbean and the Mascarenes via a transnational and transcolonial approach to the coolie experience' (Bragard 2008, 19).

Andil Gosine's initiative *After Indenture* (2017) indicates how artistic works created by the descendants of indentured workers draw on the explicit connections to indentureship and the 'coolie' heritage derived from such inter-disciplinary studies and how they inform

broader understandings of the human condition. As he states, drawing attention to the works of such artists can spur

> deeper inquiries into the impact of the system on the constitution of our very humanities: How did it affect our desires, our sense of worth, our attitudes to each other, to ourselves? These questions …. are a necessary but vastly underconsidered component of the social studies of problems that have dominated the field, including domestic violence, alcoholism, patriarchy, poverty, nationalism. In whispers and shouts, visual art practices broach difficult, and often understated, truths of the indentureship experience and re veal its contentious legacy, loaded as it is with ambivalence, contradiction, and possibility. (67)

Danny Flynn's Coolitude series of screen prints which transform the original archival portraits of indentured migrants into contemporary artworks, serve not only to reclaim the colonial archive but equally to regain the humanness of the subjects, to allow these individuals 'to bear witness themselves to their own endeavour, and to speak of who they were, what they went through and what they achieved …the communications of their physical selves [dress, medical conditions, ornamentation etc] reach out and inform us about who they were, enabling us to imagine their sufferings, their sense of self-worth, their ambitions and expectations.' The production of the 'Coolitude' prints as a palimpsest of identities and personal experiences challenges the homogenising victim narrative of indenture while their exhibition encourages a broad cross section of the population to relate to the indenture theme, 'including many people who have relatives who have migrated for work, or who are immigrants themselves. This focus has prompted further reflection on identities and cultures, and the continued exploration of how portraits presented with words and the injection of aesthetic paraphernalia offer additional narratives to describe and display subjects' lives' (Carter & Flynn, 2017).

Forensic anthropologists, archaeologists and genealogists, among others, are bringing new sources and approaches to bear in the aim of excavating indenture experiences and expanding knowledge. Work carried out by Julia Haines and Saša Caval (2015) at the Bras

d'Eau Sugar Estate in Mauritius has brought new insights into how exchange networks functioned within the plantation space as well as recovering physical artefacts such as fragments of *marmites* (cooking pots), clay pipes, coins, buttons, earrings, and buckles which shed light on vestiges of life on the estate and how communities and identities were constituted. Personal family genealogical quests combined with journalistic investigation (Bahadur, 2013) and historical documentation (Govinden & Carter, 2010) have similarly yielded new models and collaborative methodologies for the appraisal and presentation of an increasingly diverse range of sources.

The transformation of physical locations such as sugar estates and immigration depots into tourist attractions and the co-optation of colonial archives in the service of self-revelatory literature has not, of course, been unproblematic. Lomarsh Roopnarine's review of Gaiutra Bahadur's book *Coolie Woman* (2013) contends that its partial reading of the archival record leads to a skewed appraisal of women's experiences under indenture, while the book itself 'adds nothing new to the existing literature' (2014, 464-466). Srilata Ravi (2007) hints at the problematics inherent in state-funded heritage projects when she notes that political leaders have long experience of weaving 'the story of the immigrant Indian into a Mauritian romance of indenture' (23). Catherine Reinhardt (2006) has explored the tensions between history and identity in slave memorial sites in the French Caribbean, much of which applies with equal force to the indenture commemoration sites in the Mascarenes and elsewhere. Anouck Carsignol (2009) has charted the political appropriation of the history of indenture in Mauritius, noting, for example, the wording on a stone stele erected in 1935, which commemorates 'The Centenary of Indian Colonisation 1835-1935,' alongside what is termed the 'hinduization of the natural heritage of Mauritius' in the conversion of the Grand Bassin lake into the Ganga Talao Hindu pilgrimage site. The transformation of language and of

physical spaces may well be a means of converting a history of humiliation and stigmatisation into a symbolic resource but these transformative discourses can be read as exclusionist by local communities of non-north Indian Hindu ancestry, creating new problematics. The arrogation of the site of the colonial era Immigration Depot as the sanskritized Aapravasi Ghat, now a UNESCO world heritage site, and the inference that it has consequently become 'a place of exclusion' has been discussed by Mathieu Claveyrolas (2010, 23).

Roopnarine (2014) sounded a warning about the prevalence of 'nostalgia' amongst diaspora communities of indenture descendants and the distortions of reassembled identities and re-imagined homelands has long been a preoccupation of scholars (Said 2000). Idealized visions in diaspora, creations of stereotypical forebears and ignorance of historical realities can damage diaspora communities (Radhakrishnan 2003, 123). Where historical writing about subaltern migrant communities is absent or ignored, distortions and disjunctures are likely. In a telling critique of journalist Shenaz Patel's (2004) novel about the lives of workers on the Chagos archipelago pre-exile, Antje Ziethan (2013) has observed that the reliance on a semi-mythical narrative propagated by the descendants of the exiled community has resulted in a mimic discourse which does little more than caricature Chagossians. In welcoming the dialogues between historians, novelists, archaeologists, genealogists, artists, journalists and others, it is important to underscore the centrality of the written archive in facilitating an understanding of past lived realities. Trouillot (1995) has famously pointed out that historical narratives are a 'bundle of silences' and Anne Stoler (2010) has emphasised the necessity of 'studying the shadows cast by imperial governance' and of attempting to discern the muted forms of past lives; equally while it should not necessarily be the sole

preserve of the historian to retrieve singular stories from the dusty volumes of public archives, the colonial archive as a rich source for reading against the grain and for weeding out remarkable stories of forgotten subaltern lives should never be underestimated or ignored.

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